

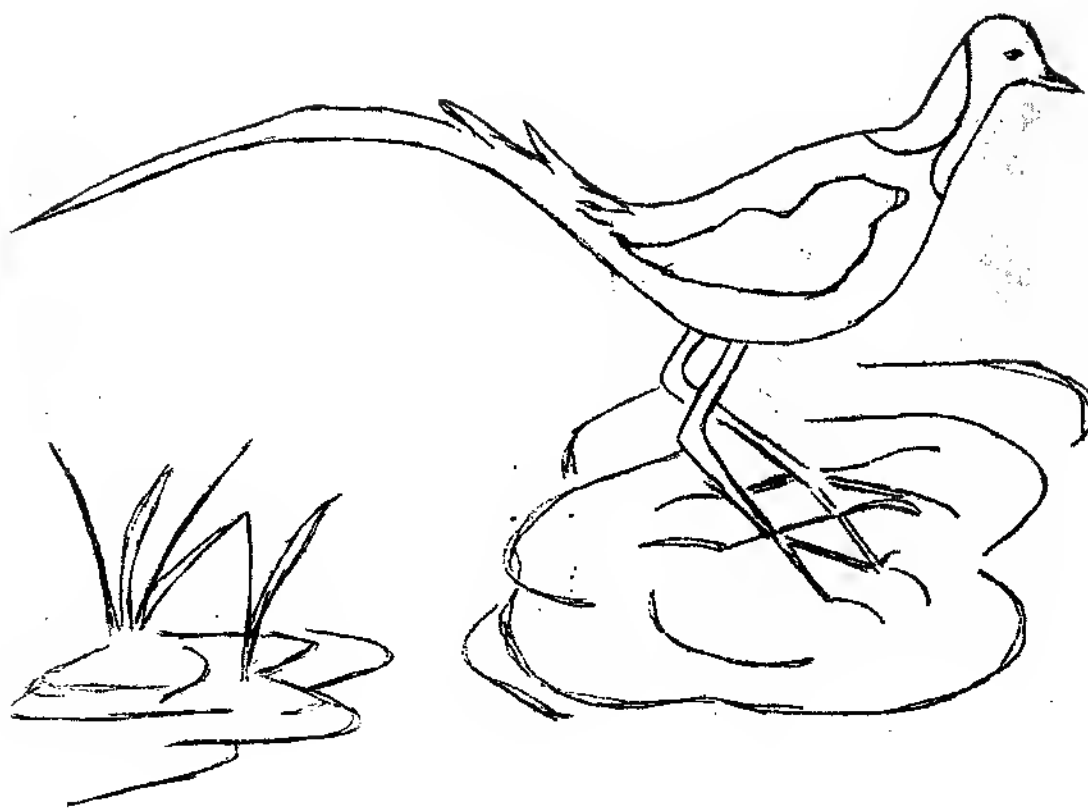
# NEWSLETTER

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## FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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JUNE-1966  
VOLUME 6 No. 6



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# NEWSLETTER

FOR

BIRDWATCHERS

Vol. 6, No. 6

June 1966

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## UNFAMILIAR VISITORS TO MADRAS

By

R.A.S. Mellsuish

A change of weather is a time for the birdwatcher to stand to, particularly near the coast. At the end of April, which had as usual been hot and dry in Madras, high winds hit the shore here, and brought with them torrential rain from the Bay of Bengal. It was a moment to be out on the prowl, looking for birds blown astray. I chose the 30th to visit the southern end of the lagoon at Pulicat. The sky was overcast. There had been some rain the previous night, and a big storm was in the offing: I could see it piling up over the sea to the north-east, a huge dark blue-grey wall of jagged cloud. Its assault was obviously going to bring my expedition to an abrupt end.

There was not very much in the way of bird-life on the water's edge: a Curlew, a handful of black-stomached Golden Plover, some large and Lesser Sand Plover, with a lot of rufous on their breasts and at the sides of the head, and a smattering of Little Stint and Curlew-Sandpiper. A little way out, standing in the shallows, a dozen assorted Laridae, Caspian and Gullbilled Terns and Brownheaded Gulls. Nothing else.

So I thought, at least; and I began to fear I was going to get a drenching for nothing. The storm was barely ten minutes away. Then I caught sight of the very thing I had come out in search of -- something extraordinary and entirely unfamiliar. A pair of small, slender terns, gracefully but ineffectually trying to make headway against the freshening wind, at first glance almost entirely black. Whiskered Terns might be expected to have black patches on their stomachs at this time of the year, but here were birds with wholly black bodies: head, face, throat, nape, back,

belly, all black. The coverts under the wing were black, too. The rest of both sides of the wing was grey, except, on the upper side, for a thick dark leading-edge to the primaries and a whitish line aft of it, and a pale greyish white area somewhere on the coverts. The tails, above and below, were the only parts of the birds that were pure white. They were short and squarish, without streamers, like a Whiskered Tern's. I could not distinguish any colour on the beak and legs; the beaks looked black, but then so do the beaks of Whiskered Terns unless one can get very close to them. In any case, it was blowing hard now and there was no question of a leisureed examination of these creatures through a telescope. I barely had time to make the briefest of notes and pack away my gear before all the birds in sight were suddenly hurled away like fallen leaves before the onrush of the storm, and a few seconds later the whole world was smudged out in sideways rain!

These were Whitewinged Black Terns, Chlidonias leucoptera (Temminck). Though not apparently unknown in Ceylon, the absence of published records of this species for South India suggests that it has rarely if ever been observed here. When Mr. Humayun Abdulali recorded it from Bombay (1950, J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc. 49:310) he said it had not been reported before from anywhere in peninsular India. Stuart Baker, in the second edition of the Fauna, described it as common all down the east coast, but he did not support the remark with evidence or say what led him to such a belief. It is not true now. Commenting on Baker's statement, Whistler (J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc. 39:247) wrote, "The unwary might be led by this to expect to find the bird normally in the Presidency, so it may be as well to emphasize the fact that the Old Fauna (4:309) states that it has not been clearly identified from any part of India west of Tipperah and I have seen no evidence to make me disagree with this statement."

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## BIRD AMAZONS

By

Jamal Ara

Mrs. Bustard-Quail has claim to fame as one of the few females of birds who dominate their males; the others in India are the hens of the Little Button Quail and the Button Quail.

These birds can be distinguished from true quails, especially in hand, by their having only three toes, the hind-toe being missing. If you shoot or buy a three-toed quail you can be sure it is one of this strange tribe.

In most birds, Indian or belonging to other parts of the world, the females are smaller and less gorgeously plumaged than the males. The duller colouring of the females in most species has a protective function for the hens sitting on the nest are less conspicuous and less liable to attack.

The hens of the three-toed quails abhor all domestic responsibilities and are the dominant partners of the short-lived marriage. They lay the eggs but do not sit over the nest. They leave the incubation and rearing of the young to the males.

The females parcel out the territory too and use their gorgeous plumage for both intimidating rival females and for courting the males. The fights for territory begin as symbolic demonstrations with much aggressive gesturing and posturing. These quails have not much song, but whatever capacity for making noise during courtship there is, is largely among the females.

The small bush or heavy grass in cultivated fields or the under-growth of light forest which these birds tenant throughout India, Ceylon and Burma resounds during the territorial display with loud, drumming and booming sounds. That is the voice, call or song, as you please, of these bird amazons. They first drum Dr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r and then bellow out from puffed breasts and throats boom - boom - boom. The hen bustard-quails are the loud-est, while the button-quails and the little button quails have muffled voices of the same pattern, a cross between a coo and a purr. At its poorest this call sounds like a plaintive moan.

These bird amazons are polyandrous. They fight over a male but as soon as they are mated and the eggs are laid -- in a shallow hollow on the ground, protected by a bush or grass, they leave the males to brood. The nests are often tunnelled through a dense tuft of sirki or moonj grass and the clutch of three to four eggs, greyish white profusely speckled with reddish brown or blacking purple, laid at the back, the brooding male going and coming through the hole in the grass.

The hens having laid the eggs wander in search of new territory and new males. Sometimes a few hens will be together for a short while in the undecided period after a mating, but soon the grass widows, with renewed interest in mating, will start fighting. Stuart Baker kept many males together in captivity but the females would always fight each other to death. So desperate is the fight under natural conditions that it is possible to walk up and catch two fighting hens. In North Bihar bird-trapper know of this pugnacity of the hens of these quails and catch the with the aid of decoy females, mind it, not males.

The victor of a fight gets the male over whom the fight has ranged. The male himself looks a subdued creature and proceeds to line with feather and grass the nest it is his lot to make.

The breeding season of these quails is long, practically extending over the entire year. The fights intermittently take place at all hours, morning, noon, and night. In one season a female may have had four or five 'husbands' in succession.

It is difficult to call the mere males of these birds by so descriptive a name as 'cock', implicit as it is with assertion and fight.

The Bustard-Quail (Turnix suscitator), called 'Gulu' in Hindi, is an almost tailless ground bird, the size of a sparrow but more roundish and plump. In the bush it seems a darkly and heavily barred bird with a slight whitish apology for a crest over the black-spotted head, the chin, throat, neck and breast are velvet black, and strike one's eyes if the bird raises itself. That is rare for it is a great skulker. The smaller male is duller than the hen and has a white chin and black and buff banded breast.

The Little Button-Quail (Turnix sylvatica) is smaller than the Bustard-Quail, one of the smallest game birds, and so tiny, light and puffed out it looks that it is called lava in Hindi. It is readily recognized by the white line that traverses down the centre of its head. It has much yellowish whiteness in its finely mottled feathers and has a stiff pointed tail and a slaty bill.

The Indian Button-Quail (Turnix tanki) is the same size as the bustard-quail and is called the burra lava to show that it is bigger than Little Button-Quail. A rusty red broad collar on the neck and the upper breast of the hens is important for its identification.

All these three-toed quails are found all over India, except Punjab and Rajputana. A local race of bustard-quail inhabits the area round Calcutta and the Botanical Gardens are the favourite fighting and nesting ground.

Three-toed quails with similar habits are found in Australia and Africa. Apart from these three-toed quails the only other birds known to have dominant females are the red-necked and grey phalaropes. These birds of the water breed near the Arctic Circle and so we miss their fights nor do we see them in their breeding plumage. They are winter visitors to India and are called tuhi.

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### SOME BIRDS IN OUR GARDEN

By

Zafar Futehally

I saw many interesting birds in our garden at Andheri, Bombay, during the past few months. In the cold weather I enjoyed watching two Redbreasted Flycatchers, a male and a female, flitting about in their characteristic vivacious way from one part of the garden to another and occasionally descending on a stone on the ground. The male and the female occupied two different sectors of the garden and did not seem to have any contact with each other during the winter sojourn away from their breeding grounds. They indulged in a low whistle which always indicated their presence. If they kept quiet one would hardly see them. Blyth's Red Warbler was another winter visitor whose presence was indicated by its sharp chek, chek call. As the hot weather approached this bird started to warble and sing quite melodiously. The Eastern Grey Wagtail always comes to us some time about October and invests the garden with a dainty quality. We had the good fortune of having with us Dr. Frank Fraser Darling of the Nature Conservancy and the well-known author of A PELICAN IN THE WILDERNESS, A HERD OF RED DEER, and several other books, for a couple of days. He thought that the wagtail represented more than any other avian, the true essence of a bird by its grace and beauty. One day suddenly a sharp flycatcher call indicated the presence of a Paradise Flycatcher. This bird stayed in our garden for a fortnight and then moved away.

During February and March another set of birds came into prominence. There was a nest of a Purplerumped Sunbird and we watched the female working hard at feeding the chicks. The male is not too keen about domestic chores. I managed to put a plastic ring round the leg of one of the chicks but never saw this chick again. I hope my ringing was not the cause of its death. Its companion which was not ringed was seen by us on many subsequent days being fed by the parents. The cheep, cheep call of the young one drew our attention all hours of the day.

Golden Orioles also flashed through our garden at this time at break-neck speed. It is amazing how they escape disaster by colliding with the branches of trees through which they dart along. Some years back a young oriole came to grief by dashing against the window pane of an open window and caused us much pain by dying the next day. I am sure that these birds are nesting in our garden, but I have not been able to find the nest yet.

Ashy Wren Warblers, Tailor Birds, and Spotted Owlets were the other species which thrust themselves on our attention during these months.

In early April the Magpie Robin was easily the most eye-catching bird. Its song in the morning indicated that a territory has been acquired and a few days ago I found the female carrying nesting material under the Mangalore tile roof of our house. The male does not help at all with the building, but accompanies the female back and forth on her material carrying trips to ensure that she is doing her job. But the bird which has really won our hearts this season is the Whitespotted Fantail Flycatcher a pair (I am almost certain the progeny of the bird which nested in our garden last year) built a nest in a shrub just three feet from the ground. This was in early April. I am afraid we watched the birds too intently at their nest making, so they abandoned the site and started to build at the identical spot on a white Ixora shrub where the parents had built last year. Two eggs were laid and incubation commenced, but after two or three days a garden lizard presumably, devoured the eggs. The birds built a third nest on a Quisqualis creeper and we watched them at work for a couple of hours on the first day. Curiously, no progress was made on the subsequent days and we suspected that the reason was a prowling bloodsucker lizard on the creeper which perhaps made the birds realize that further efforts would be doomed to failure. I drove away the predator and was delighted to find after a week that the birds re-started to build at another place on the Quisqualis just a few feet away from where the previous nest was intended to be. This morning (19th May) I had the pleasure of seeing the first chick and the second egg will perhaps hatch tomorrow.

Postscript. May 23rd: I was out of Bombay from the 20th evening till the evening of the 22nd. When I returned the nest was empty. I am sure the indefatigable couple will build again.

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SALT LAKES AS BIRD SANCTUARY : LAND RECLAMATION  
AND HUNTERS WREAK HAVOC  
(With a map)

(Reproduced from Statesman, Calcutta)

By Special Representative of the  
Statesman in Eastern India

The migration of hundreds of birds from whatever remains of the Salt Lakes on the eastern fringe of Calcutta to the Zoological Gardens at the break of dawn for shelter during the day is not season but a daily occurrence.

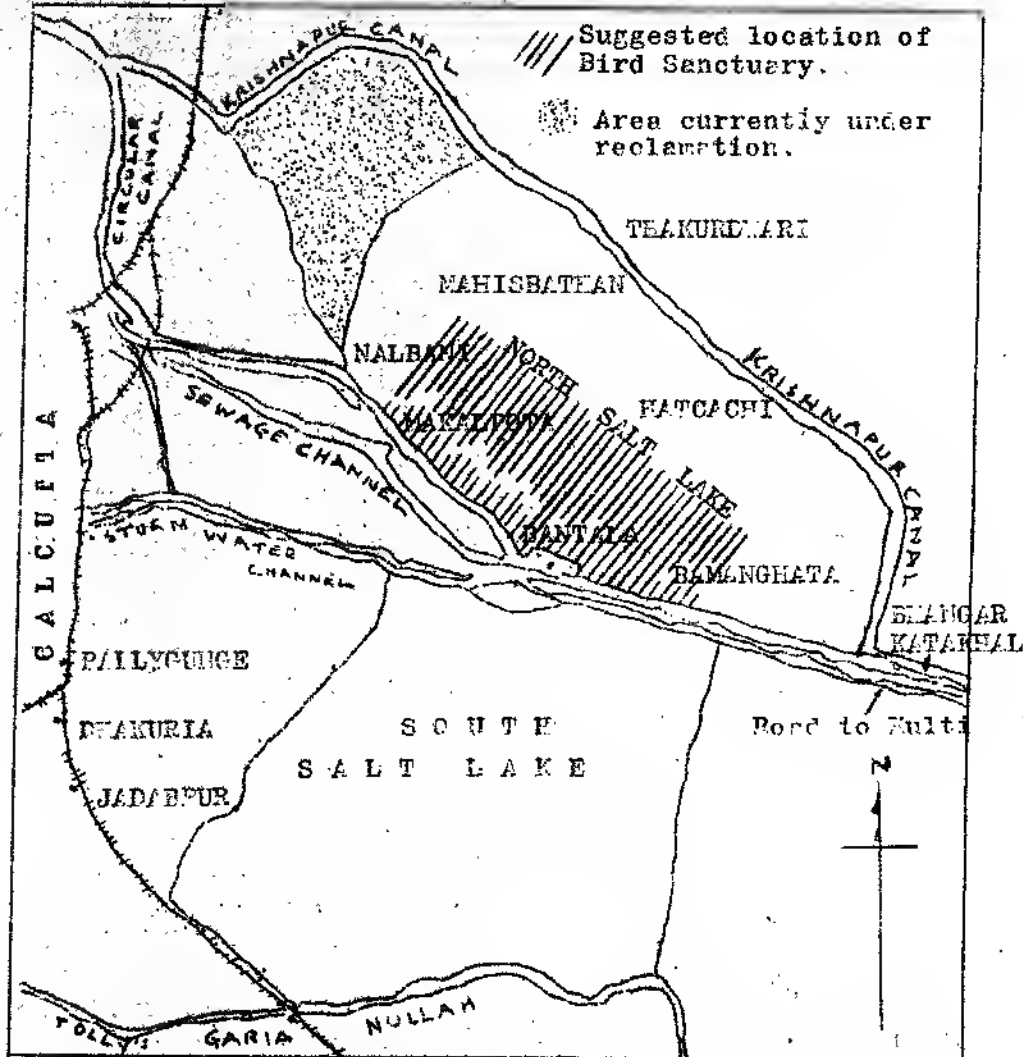
Wagtails, swallows, ducks, snipes, plovers, sandpipers and others all flee their natural habitat during the day when it turns into a favourite hunting ground for bird hunters from Calcutta. Not protected by the West Bengal Wild Life Preservation Act, they are completely at the mercy of the pleasure-seekers whose wanton depredations continue throughout the year.

The precarious and pitiable existence of these winged animals has disturbed bird-watchers and ornithologists and has been taken note of by the Governor, Miss Naidu, who is chairman of a consultative committee for allied problems. Her committee is now studying whether men and birds can co-exist to their mutual advantage.

A plea for a bird sanctuary in the Salt Lakes area is made by Mr. Biswamoy Biswas of the Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta. He says that birds, apart from being interesting from the academic and aesthetic points of view, also play an important role in man's economy by preying upon large hoards of insects which destroy crops and plantations, and carry diseases.

Bird Habitat. The Salt Lakes, now much reduced in area, cover about 38 square miles of swamps most of which are used as fish-

eries by private owners. With their extensive reed-beds and other aquatic vegetation, the area provides an excellent habitat for a large variety of aquatic and marsh birds, and a feeding ground for many others. About 200 different kinds of birds have been recorded in this area which has been a paradise for bird-lovers for well over a century.



The sketch map of the Salt Lakes and the surrounding area showing the suggested location of the bird sanctuary

The past few years' difficult foreign exchange position has proved a blessing to the birds. Restrictions on imports of cartridges and their high price have considerably limited the activity of bird-killers. This has apparently caused some improvement in the bird population of the Salt Lakes. The Cotton Teal, which became exceedingly scarce in this area between 1950 and 1955, can now again be seen in fair numbers, sometimes in flocks of even half a dozen or so.

Unfortunately, the programme to reclaim the Salt Lakes has posed a serious threat to the flourishing bird life in these marshes with its consequent likely increase of the insect menace. Any programme to reclaim now areas can hardly afford to ignore this aspect of the balance of nature. There were many instances in the last two or three centuries when serious changes in natural ecological conditions by man in many areas proved to be a costly venture.

Judicious planning of the reclamation programme, taking into



consideration the biological aspects, can effectively conserve animal resources without, hindering the project. All that is necessary is to set apart a patch of a few square miles in the Salt Lakes undisturbed, as a sanctuary for birds. A wide embankment may be constructed to enclose the sanctuary and it should be lined with trees and bushes. The natural aquatic vegetation and planted trees will suffice to encourage and attract birds to live and roost there, if there are no trigger-happy marauders around to make them feel unsafe. Strict vigilance and deterrent punitive measures, if seriously applied, can take care of this aspect. Birds are generally very confiding creatures. They soon learn when and where they are given protection and are not molested, and in such areas they come very close to man.

A five-square-mile plot, covering the southern half of the North Salt Lake from Makalpota to Bamanghata can be turned into a bird sanctuary. A number of narrow embankments through the sanctuary will facilitate close-range observation by bird-watchers and ornithologists.

If thought desirable, a small fee may be levied for entry into the sanctuary. Many foreign bird-lovers and ornithologists who visit Calcutta as tourists, are very keen on seeing Indian birds. At present, they have to be satisfied with the few they see in the city or in its vicinity, or have to go to far-off places like the Ghana Sanctuary in Rajasthan.

The extension of the West Bengal Wild Life Preservation Act, 1959, to the area, stimulation of people's interest in wild life, and employment of the staff necessary for the strict enforcement of the Act, may all be taken up together to make the area an effective bird sanctuary.

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#### ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE OF THE PIED CRESTED CUCKOO

By

S.D. Jayakar

Genetics and Biometry Laboratory  
Bhubaneswar, Orissa

In response to Mr. E.W. Ramble's appeal for information regarding dates of arrival of the Pied Crested Cuckoo in different parts of India in the May Newsletter I give below the relevant data for the years 1963-65 in the vicinity of Bhubaneswar.

	<u>Arrival</u>	<u>Departure</u>
1963	June 3	September 17
1964	May 20	October 15
1965	May 31	October 23

These are dates when the pied crested cuckoo was seen or heard for the first and last times during the year.

In 1964 there was no record of the species between September 17 and October 15 and in 1965 between September 19 and October 23, and this seems to support Mr. Ramble's statement that though most birds leave by September a few stay on till well into October.

In 1963 and 1965, the dates of arrival near Bhubaneswar and in Shaharanpur are almost the same, whereas in 1964, there is a gap of 23 days, and this makes things still curiouser.

I hope Mr. Ramble gets many replies to his appeal and that more such data on other species are contributed to the Newsletter.

Postscript. This year the Pied Crested Cuckoo was heard near Bhubaneswar on 19th of May.

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#### NOTES AND COMMENTS

R.A.S. Melliush says in his article published in this issue that a storm is a good time to be on the beach to look out for birds tossed out of their course by the wind. It is interesting to record that a Short-tailed Tropic Bird was found dead on the beach at Kihim, 15 miles south of Bombay, during May. There had been some inclement weather during that period, but whether this was the cause of the presence of this unusual bird in this area is difficult to tell.

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#### CORRESPONDENCE

##### Bird news from Madras

We are living on the sea shore here in a casuarina plantation. Every morning it is impossible to sleep after 5.30 as there is a group of about 15 Hill Mynas which make so much noise that we have to get up. This has been disbelieved by experts like Mr. M. Krishnan but even a birdwatcher on his first day of birdwatching cannot make a mistake when so many birds are hardly 10 yards away. There are also Common Mynas for comparison by sight and sound.

The other noisy birds here are Whitebrowed Bulbuls, Bluetailed Bee-eaters, and Ioras. Actually the morning chorus is a racket when Drongos, Whitebreasted Kingfishers, and Goldenbacked Woodpeckers join in.

S.V. Nilakanta

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##### Weaver-birds nesting on telegraph wires

While travelling towards Attur, in Salem District, on Tuesday, the 3rd of May, I had the opportunity to see a group of weaverbirds Ploceus philippinus? engaged in nest building, with nests suspended from telegraph wires. The nests were in various stages of construction. The site was at a point about 50 feet away from Salem-Cuddalore road and over crops of paddy. Water is available in the many wells, but there are few trees in this area, as every bit of cultivable land has been used up for crops like maize, sugarcane, and tapioca.

As the observation was made from a bus which had temporarily slowed down, I could not collect more details. Nevertheless, I have no doubt about the identity of the nests and the builders. Even though I had covered some fifty more miles on bus in Attur taluk, I did not come across any other weaver nests on telegraph wires.

Shri Badshah wrote about weaverbirds nesting on telegraph wires, in an article in the Madras Mail (1964). Shri A.R.K. Das has also observed this (personal communication). This is the first time I have observed this, and to my mind, illustrates the

ecological tolerance of the weaverbirds.

Daniel Mathew

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Night Herons breeding at Ernakulam, Kerala

With reference to Sri N.G. Pillai's article about the occurrence and breeding of Night Herons at Ernakulam in the Newsletter Vol. 6, No. 4, and his remarks that these birds are rare in Kerala, I have to state that my son T. Balakrishnan in his notes (in Vol. 5, No. 9, Newsletter) on the breeding of the Little Egret in Kerala has mentioned the fact of a big colony of Night and Pond Herons breeding in tamarind, peepal, and mango trees at Melamuri in the heart of Palghat town. Considering the numbers of Night Herons breeding at Palghat my son is of the opinion that the Night Heron is not now a rare bird in Kerala, and that by careful observation a few more such roosts and breeding colonies may be found.

May I further add that Sri N.G. Pillai's translation of 'pakalunnaz' as 'day-time diner' doesn't seem to be appropriate to the very name of Night Heron, a habitual night-feeder. The word 'pakalunnaz' should therefore be translated or interpreted to mean 'day time non-diner or abstainer'.

A few of these birds have established their roosts and are regularly breeding in some very large and shady tamarind trees in the heart of Coimbatore town. I have seen them breeding, in company with Pond Herons, in babul trees standing in tanks. Their breeding season is July and August, both at Palghat and Coimbatore.

B. Subbiah Pillay  
(Communicated by Prof. K.K. Neelakar)

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